

Jews and Other Quebecois:
Recent Developments in the Relationship Between French Canadians
and the Montreal Jewish Community

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I. Opening remarks

My lecture is going to be somewhat difficult. It is one in which I fully expect there to be differing interpretations and points of view. That is, firstly, because it deals with Quebec. Quebec is similar to Israel in that nothing relating to it is ever completely simple, straightforward and free of controversy. Secondly, this lecture deals with relations between French Canadians, a majority group, and Jews, an important minority ethnic community within Quebec. Such a topic always has the potential to be an explosive issue, given the extreme sensitivities built up in the last generation on all sides of the controversy. Thirdly, this lecture is potentially perilous because it deals with a contemporary subject on which any one of the speakers in this group are qualified to express an opinion. In my experience, if people can express an opinion, they surely will!

II. Intellectual Relations: History

In this lecture, I will not spend much time on the political relationship between the Jewish community of Montreal and the Government of Quebec, though this is a subject that is of considerable importance, and one which I will be unable to avoid entirely, try as I might. I rather wish to look beyond specifically political issues, such as the prospects of Quebec separatism, access to English-language educational institutions, and recruitment of minority groups to the Quebec civil service. These are certainly all issues of great current importance for the Jewish community in Montreal. They also receive a great deal of media attention locally, and, to a somewhat lesser extent nationally and internationally. I would, however, rather wish to talk about some developments which receive much less media attention but which are, in my opinion, of no less importance for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between French Canadians and Jews in contemporary Quebec. In this lecture, I will address the changing ways in which elements of the French Canadian intelligentsia are beginning to examine Quebec's Jewish Community and its importance for Quebec society in general-past and present.

Before I can intelligently discuss this contemporary phenomenon, a word is in order concerning the history of intellectual relations between French Canadians and Jews in Quebec. The early history of these relations has been well described in an article written by Jack Jedwab, a man who has been himself most active in contemporary efforts at Jewish-French-Canadian dialogue.⁽¹⁾ From Jedwab's study, it is quite clear that the first significant initiatives of this nature took place in the late 1930s between Rabbi Harry Stem of Montreal's Reform Temple Emanu-El and members of the Montreal Catholic Clergy, prominent among whom was Father Stephane Valiquette. In the beginning, this dialogue was conducted largely with members of the clergy. This was in consonance with the notion held by the leadership of the Jewish community that, indeed, French Quebec was largely a traditional Catholic society in which the clergy played a leading role in the formation of public opinion.

Later on, starting in the 1950s and continuing into the 1960s the focus of Jewish efforts at dialogue with French Canadians changed to secular intellectuals, paralleling the development of French Canadian society in those years away from clerical control. Thus, the Canadian Jewish Congress began the forum called "Cercle juif de langue française", bringing together leaders of the Jewish community and significant figures in French Canadian political and literary circles. The significance of Jedwab's findings is that, historically, the initiative for such dialogue was almost invariably taken by people within the Jewish community, concerned by manifestations of anti-Semitism within the French-Canadian population, so as to reach out to people they considered to be crucial in the formation of public opinion. In all cases, the initiative was definitely from the side of the Jewish community though certainly the Jews increasingly found people at the highest levels of French Canadian society, such as Rene Levesque, accepting their initiatives. A similar initiative, in the 1980s, was the launch of the monthly magazine, *Jonathan*, by the Comité Quebec-Israel.(2)

Despite these initiatives, however, French Canadian intellectuals throughout this period of nearly half a century found little of interest in the study of the Canadian Jewish community. Indeed, until quite recently, the rule was that only the Jews were interested in their own history and situation in Canada. (3) The only partial exception to this rule in Quebec concerns the role, or lack thereof, of Jews in the French regime in Canada. The clash of mythologies, whereby Jewish historians magnified the involvement of the Gradiis family of Bourdeaux in the supply of the French colony of Nouvelle France, while French Canadian historians went in entirely the opposite direction, has been explored in an interesting and significant article written by Richard Menkis (4)

III. More Recent Developments

In the last two decades, and even more surely in the last decade, there has been a major change in this attitude. The Jews, both individually and most certainly as a community are still vitally interested in the continuation of a dialogue. That has not basically changed. What has changed, however, is the positive interest on the part of a number of French-Canadian intellectuals not merely in dialogue with the Jews of Quebec, but also in some serious study of the community's history and sociology. We are certainly not speaking of any mass movement, but we are just as certainly dealing with a considerable phenomenon both in quantity and in quality. There are a number of structural reasons for this Development.

To begin with, part of the answer surely includes the impact of the Holocaust and of the major changes in the perspective on Jews and Judaism on the part of the Roman Catholic Church, symbolized by Vatican II. More importantly, however, the last twenty years has witnessed a remarkable series of developments within Quebec society. These developments may be characterized as a maturation of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution". Until the 1950s, the situation of intellectual inwardness regnant in French-Canadian society in Quebec has been characterized by historians of Quebec as "la noirceur". Since the 1960s French Canadian society in Quebec has experienced a period of renewal and openness to new ideas as well as an aggressive social and economic empowerment of French Canadians which has been called the "Quiet Revolution". Certainly the "Quiet Revolution" has generated a good deal of noise and furore, notably in the rise to power in Quebec of the Parti Québécois with its program of Separatism in 1976. It previously generated some terrorist violence, in 1970, which goes under the name of the October Crisis, and it has also certainly generated considerable apprehension on the part of the non-French Canadian population of Quebec as well as the rest of Canada, particularly during the periods surrounding the Referenda of 1980 and 1995. A result of all of

these developments has been a diminution, through emigration of a considerable portion of non French-Canadian residents of Quebec. Revolutions, even quiet ones, have their victims.

By now, a generation of French-Canadians has matured since the beginning of the "Quiet Revolution". This maturation means a number of things. First of all, the older generation of French Canadians, though still politically powerful, is passing slowly but surely from the scene. That generation grew up in a Quebec in which they were deemed to be-or thought of themselves as-less than first class citizens on account of their language and culture. A newer generation of French Canadians, which came to maturity since the Quiet Revolution has a sense of itself as "in charge" of things, at least on the provincial level. This generation is certainly deeply aware of the precariousness of the position of French Quebec's society and culture as a minority in the "sea" of English North America. It possesses, however, both a greater cultural self-confidence as well as a greater openness to the languages cultures of the outside world. At the same time, Quebec society, particularly in Montreal but also to a somewhat lesser extent throughout the province is becoming increasingly globalized as a result of a major wave of immigration from all continents.

The need for such immigration is widely seen as a "fact of life". In previous generations, French Canadians enjoyed a birthrate high enough to both ensure population increase within Quebec and to create a large excess population which emigrated elsewhere in Canada and in the New England States of the United States. Recently, however, the secularization of society, which accompanied the "Quiet Revolution", has meant that Quebec's birthrate plummeted to well below demographic replacement level. This demographic factor is of tremendous importance in that it means the lessening of the political "weight" of French Canada within Canada as a whole and thus serves as an argument, among others, for the creation of a Quebec state separate from Canada.

All of these reasons have spurred French-Canadian intellectuals in Quebec to examine the possibilities of how to integrate the new immigration-already in Quebec and to come-into the Quebec of the future. All of this has also caused a number of them to begin paying some serious attention to the original non-French, non-aboriginal, non-English and non-Christian community to be established in Quebec-the Jews.

The beginnings of French-Canadian interest not only in the Jewish community of Quebec, but particularly their interest in the relationship of Jews can be seen in the 1980s. First of all, there was the fruitful collaboration between David Rome, the Nestor of the study of Canadian Jewry, and Jacques Langlais. Their collaboration resulted in a major work, *Juifs et Quebecois francais.-200 ans d'histoire commun.*(5) This book, specifically addressed to French-Canadians, is a truly pioneering and remarkable work of history and of apologetics, with some of the faults of such works as well as their virtues. Other older researchers include Denis Vaugeois, a former cabinet minister in the Parti Quebecois government, both as author of works on early relations between Jews and French-Canadians as well as through his publishing house, Editions Septentrion, which has published numerous books and translations in this field, both in French and in English. Also in the older generation of researchers should be included Gerard Bouchard (coincidentally the younger brother of the former premier of Quebec, Lucien Bouchard), whose interest in the demography of Quebec society has led him to an interest in Quebec's Jewish community.

Of the highest importance for our story is the work of Pierre Anctil. He was trained in Anthropology at the New School in New York and did work on the French-Canadian ethnic community in New England before he made the great intellectual discovery of his life: the

Jewish community of Montreal. With the encouragement of David Rome, Ancil plunged into the study of Jewish civilization in general and of the Jewish community of Montreal in particular. He acquired expertise in the Yiddish language, which enabled him to have direct access to important source material. Along with the realization that he had found a phenomenon of interest and of substance came a mission to let the French Canadian intellectual world in on his discovery. In one of his earliest works, a collection of articles he edited, along with Gary Caldwell, he stated his purpose:

De rendre plus accessible aux francophones l'histoire et la sociologie des differents communautes ethno-culturelles du Quebec ... sous jacente a cette intention se trouve aussi une volante de mieux connaitre ce qui constitue-a nos yeux-une mutation profonde de la societe quebecoise a savoir le fait que les communautes ethno-culturelles du Quebec sont devenues un enjeu fondamentale pour cette meme societe.(8) To make the history and sociology of the different ethno-cultural communities of Quebec more accessible to francophones ... Connected with this intention is a desire to better understand something which constitutes in our eyes a profound change in Quebec society ... to understand that the ethno-cultural communities of Quebec have become a fundamental factor for this society.

A few years later, Ancil published two interpretive works, *Le rendezvous Manque*(9) and *Le Devoir*. (10) These two books went beyond the earlier anthology in that they were designed for more than imparting interesting and important historical and sociological information. They constituted an attempt by Ancil, in full consciousness of the importance of the creation and sustaining of a dialogue between French Canadians and Jews in Quebec, past". His strategy was not to deny French-Canadian anti-Semitism. What he did, however, was to minimize the practical importance of French Canadian anti-Semitism by emphasizing the ways in which the anti-semitic statements of French-Canadian intellectuals remained theoretical, with little importance for practical day-to-day relationships of ordinary people. Furthermore, he sought to contextualize the anti-semitic manifestations of French-Canadian society in the early twentieth century by bringing into the picture anglo-Canadian anti-Semitism, which was less "public" in nature, but, perhaps because of that, even more effective in restricting the opportunities of the Jewish community.

This "usable past" that Ancil had carefully built up in his publications, soon came to be fundamentally challenged by the work of Esther Delisle. Her doctoral dissertation at Universite Laval, entitled "Antisemitisme et nationalisms d'extreme dans la Province du Quebec, 1929-1939", (12) caused an immediate stir within French-Canadian society and echoed long in the op-ed pages of Quebec newspapers. In particular, well-known author, Mordecai Richler utilized Delisle's interpretation of the nature of French-Canadian anti-Semitism in the 1930s in his satirical book, *O Canada! O Quebec!* This particularly infuriated French-Canadian intellectuals and served to pour fuel on the flames of controversy.

In her dissertation, and in the version of the dissertation which was shortly published, (13) one of the major things Delisle demonstrated was that there was considerably more anti-Jewish editorial and news content in the Montreal journal of opinion, *Le Devoir*, in the years Ancil had surveyed than Ancil had indicated. Her trenchant remarks on the pervasiveness of racism and anti-Semitism, particularly in the thought and the writings of a widely-revered intellectual figure of French Canada of the time, Father Lionel Groulx, were particularly galling to those within French-Canadian nationalist circles for whom Groulx was a heroic and even mythic figure.

Whatever the merits of Delisle's research may be, the public controversy over her dissertation, which erupted even before the dissertation was approved, caught Anctil in a particularly delicate position. As a member of the jury for the dissertation, he had advocated that it not be accepted as is, but refrained from public comment on l'affaire Delisle. His former co-editor of the anthology, *Juifs et realites juives*, Gary Caldwell, however did go public with his reaction.(14) In this article, in which he noted that the Jewish members of the jury supported acceptance of the dissertation and the French-Canadian members opposed it, he included the following on his perception of the difference between Jewish and French-Canadian perspectives on the Canadian Jewish community:

Les etudes juifs au Canada ... ont pour caracteristique d'avoir presque toutes ete faites par des individus qui s'identifient comme juifs. E. Deslisle est une exception notoire. Le sujet n'est venu a etre un monopole des juifs tout comme est ignore ce qui est ecrit par les non-juifs ... L'exclusivisme des intellectuels juifs quand ils ecrivent sur le probleme juif au Canada est regrettable et a longue, deplorable car les observateurs plus critiques et plus impartiaux ont beaucoup a offrir. Jewish studies in Canada ... are characterized by being almost all made by individuals who identify as Jews. E. Delisle is a notorious exception. The subject has become a monopoly of Jews while everything written by non-Jews is ignored ... The exclusivism of Jewish intellectuals when they write about the Jewish problem in Canada is regrettable and, in the long term deplorable, because observers who are more critical and impartial have much to offer.

In the last paragraph of his article, he wrote that he was: "bien conscient que, selon l'acceptation contemporaine de l'antisemitisme, je ne peux faire autrement que passer pour un antisemite." Quite conscious that, according to the accepted conte antisemitism I can do no other than to pass for an antisemite. Wh reaction was to recall the verse from Roln,

My second reaction was to recognize that a tragedy had occurred. Bridges that had been built were damaged. In particular, the politicization of what began as an academic dispute ultimately made cooperation between Jewish and French-Canadian researchers that much more difficult and between French-Canadian researchers and Esther Delisle practically impossible. Anctil, who had been teaching at McGill University, left academe, and his pen remained relatively silent for several years.

Time has begun to heal some of the bitterness of l'Affaire Delisle, and an interchange between French-Canadian and Jewish researchers in Quebec has resumed. This resumption was symbolized by a colloquium which took place in March, 1999, co-sponsored by the Jewish Public library of Montreal and the Institut interuniversitaire de recherche sur les populations. The French language colloquium was entitled "Relations judeo-quebecoises: identites et perceptions mutuelles". This colloquium attracted an extraordinary audience, both in terms of numbers and in terms of mixture (Jewish and French-Canadian) and responsiveness. It also, importantly, signaled the debut on a public stage of a new generation of Jewish and French-Canadian researchers on the subject of the Jewish community of Quebec. In addition to presentations from more experienced researchers, it featured a younger generation of Jewish scholars capable of communicating in French, like Rebecca Margolis, and of French-Canadian,

scholars like Sylvie Taschereau and Jean-Ignace Olazabal. It is this new generation of scholars, who are just at or just beyond the doctoral dissertation stage, and others like them, who are likely to bring an entirely new dimension to the study of the Jewish community of Montreal.

This interest in the Jewish community on the part of French Canadians is certainly not confined to an intellectual elite. In the popular media it has translated into a major documentary presentation of Telequebec on the rise and fall of the Steinberg chain of supermarkets in Quebec. This documentary was certainly not a one time phenomenon. Telequebec also has in the preparatory stage a major documentary on the Jewish community, which bespeaks a continuing commitment to exploring this subject matter. The Museum of the History of Montreal at Pointe a Callieres is preparing a major exhibition on immigration to Montreal, in which the role of the Jewish community is prominently featured. Even the Societe St.-Jean Baptiste, which has been long been known for its chauvinistic attitudes toward non-French-Canadian residents of Quebec, has placed an ad in Hebrew in the *Montreal Gazette* on March 17, 1999, congratulating the Canadian Jewish Congress on its eightieth anniversary.

All of the developments I have been describing tonight are of interest, and I think, of some significance. What remains to be seen is whether these straws in the wind will ultimately amount to a trend or whether the very real tensions between the different segments of Quebec society will nullify them. I don't know the answer to that question. Nor would any answer I had to give amount to very much. Professors, as we all know, make notoriously poor prophets. All I can say in conclusion is that, in contemporary Quebec, there are elements in French-Canadian society working toward greater mutual understanding across linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries, and there are those who are not. Win or lose, my money is on the former group.

Notes

1 Jack Jedwab, "The Politics of Dialogue: Rapprochement Efforts Between Jews and French Canadians, 1939-1960", in Ira Robinson and Mervin Butovsky, eds. *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, Vehicule Press, 1995), pp. 42-74.

2 Cf Victor Teboul, "Pouquoi Jonathan?", *Jonathan no. 1* (Octobre, 1981), pp. 2-3.

3 Ira Robinson, "David Rome as Historian of Canadian Jewry", *Canadian Jewish Studies* 3 (1995), pp. 1-10.

4 Menkis has reference particularly to Guy Fregault and Denis Vaugeois. Richard Menkis, "Myth, Historiography and Group Relations: Jews and Non-Jewish Quebecois on the Jews and New France", *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33, 2 (1991).

5 (Montreal, Fides, 1986). Cf. Also their *Les Pierres qui parlent*.

6 Cf Pierre Anctil, *Flaneries sur les cimes de l'histoire juive montrealaise* (Sillery, Editions Septentrion, 1997)

7 Pierre Anctil and Gary Caldwell, eds. *Juifs et realites juives au Quebec* (1984)

8 Anctil and Caldwell, p. 9.

9 Pierre Anctil, *Les Juifs du Montreal face au Quebec: le rendez-vous manqué* (1988)

10 Pierre Anctil, *Le Devoir, les juifs et l'immigration: de Bourassa a Laurendeau* (1988). During the same period, Anctil established a dialogue group between Jews and French Canadians entitled "Dialogue St. Urbain".

13 *Le Traître et le juif: Lionel Groulx, le Devoir et le délire du nationalisme d'extrême droite dans la province du Québec, 1929-1939* (Montreal, 1992)

14 "La Controverse Delisle-Richler: Le discours sur l'antisémitisme au Québec et l'orthodoxie néo-libérale au Canada", *L'Agora* vol. 1, no. 9 Juin, 1994).

15 Ecclesiastes 9